

SECRET

25X1

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE
OFFICE OF POLITICAL RESEARCH

August 1976

AFTER MAO: FACTORS AND CONTINGENCIES IN THE SUCCESSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

25X1

NOTE: During preparation of this study other CIA offices were consulted, and while substantial agreement emerged, formal coordination was not sought. Comments and queries will be welcomed by the author

25X1

25X1

25X1

SECRET

PR 76 10060

SECRET

25X1

KEY JUDGMENTS

Mao Tse-tung, 82, appears to be deteriorating rapidly, and China is probably already under some degree of "collective" leadership. It seems somewhat more likely than not that Mao's domination will be succeeded by a group which includes Leftist and Rightist figures but which on balance is Centrist. If such a group in fact accedes to power, it is unlikely to make radical changes in either domestic or foreign policies in the immediate post-Mao period. It may slightly reduce tension with the USSR, but it -- or almost any other possible constellation of successors -- will probably wish to maintain the opening to the US.

FACTIONS

A legacy of the Cultural Revolution has seemed to be a "factional" leadership below Mao's level, in which many leaders can be credibly regarded as Leftist, Centrist, or Rightist, calculated primarily in terms of their apparent allegiance to and fervor for Mao's fundamental revolutionary objectives. Mao's latest and current favorite appears to be the Centrist Hua Kuo-feng, whom Mao personally named in April both as First Vice-Chairman of the Party and as Premier (passing over two Leftists who were in line for those posts). Why did not Mao elevate one of the Leftists whose policy predilections are closer to Mao's heart? The apparent answer is that Mao lacked confidence in the Leftists' ability to manage Chinese affairs, and that Hua was chosen as the most able administrator for the difficult period which Mao knew to lie ahead, the nearest thing to another Chou En-lai, who was the only one of Mao's principal lieutenants of the past 15 years to have remained in Mao's high favor until his death. Hua was a "compromise" -- not one forced on Mao by other leaders, but in the sense of Hua's being, like Chou, a man who (as Mao saw it) could be relied upon to avoid the excesses repeatedly committed by the Leftists while not abandoning Mao's long-term goals as a Rightist would.

SECRET

SECRET

At this time, those with the greatest access to Mao, and in the best position to influence whatever decisions he is able to make in his last months, appear to be the Centrist Hua Kuo-feng and the police figure Wang Tung-hsing, the head of Mao's personal bodyguard and of the overall political security apparatus. Some Leftist figures (those passed over when Hua was named) and some Rightist figures probably also have some access to Mao, and they may be trying to manipulate the old man, maneuvering for position in the post-Mao leadership. It is conceivable that Mao will once again, for the fourth time in a decade, change his mind about the succession, and, if so, in favor of the Leftists; but it seems more likely that Hua will bear the mark of Mao's favor -- for whatever that is worth -- into the post-Mao struggle.

UNLIKELY, BUT DRAMATIC, POSSIBILITIES

There are some dramatic and highly disruptive contingencies that could occur on Mao's death. The most important of these are a coup employing military and security forces of the Peking Military Region (MR), military intervention by some of the leaders of the ten MRs outside Peking, and a Soviet attack on China. An attempted coup is a serious possibility; the other two seem most unlikely except in the event of a coup.

The possibility of a coup has to be taken seriously, because of the sharp differences among various leaders and because there are forces in Peking which could probably bring off a coup, at least initially. The passed-over and unpopular Leftists, fearful about their futures, or Rightist military leaders, fearful of the Leftists, might conspire with the most important figures of the physical security apparatus -- the leaders of the Peking MR and of the smaller inner-core forces -- to seize their opponents and even the Centrist figures like Hua Kuo-feng who have kept the balance. The three key physical security figures, acting just by themselves, could probably carry out a successful coup.

But there are strong countervailing factors. Neither the Leftists nor the Rightists would seem likely to be successful in

- 2 -

SECRET

SECRET

enlisting the cooperation of the key security figures in any coup aimed at Hua. Beyond this, any hypothetical group of conspirators would have to have the cooperation or assent of military forces in the Peking area, especially the main-force armies of the Peking MR; otherwise, the coup could quickly be reversed. While two of the three key physical security figures do in fact command these forces, they too would have to face the problem of the morning after -- that is, to justify their actions not only to the forces they had employed in the coup but to military forces throughout China. They might be sufficiently persuasive -- which is the reason for regarding a coup as more than a marginal possibility. But a coup would carry a high risk of splitting the military forces of the Peking MR, leading to armed clashes among elements of them, in turn risking the spread of armed conflict throughout China to a state of anarchy or civil war. This situation would in turn entail the highest risk of Soviet intervention, a development which almost all of the post-Mao leaders -- including the physical security figures, who are on record as hard-line anti-Soviet -- would wish to avoid.

Intervention in the succession process by leaders of the MRs outside Peking seems most unlikely unless Peking itself is in a state of chaos and the conflict has spread further. As things now stand, no single MR could possibly conduct a successful offensive against the capital with its own resources, and it would be very difficult -- owing to the strict controls all along the line -- for the leaders of a group of MRs either to conspire successfully or to bring their forces into action.

The Russians might offer -- especially in a state of civil war -- to provide substantial material support to a group of MR leaders whom they believed to be pro-Soviet, but no such leaders can now be identified, nor are the central leaders likely to allow the situation to deteriorate to the point that either the MR leaders or the Russians would attempt to intervene. The Regional leaders will probably prove to be passive, accepting whatever arrangements are made in Peking and anticipating -- with reason -- an increase in their own influence with the successor leadership.

- 3 -

SECRET

SECRET

A Soviet attack on China at the time of Mao's death, whether or not coordinated with action by MR leaders, seems the least likely of the dramatic possibilities. There is no doubt of the Soviet ability to drive deep into the Northeast (without using nuclear weapons), but there are many sound military and political reasons to refrain from such an attack. Although a Chinese civil war might present a serious temptation to Moscow, even in those circumstances there would be many obstacles to a meaningful military or political victory for the Russians.

Beyond this, after Mao's death there will be the fact of a qualitatively new political situation for Moscow to try to exploit. The sensible course for the Russians, with their most implacable enemy departed and with a new group in power which is bound to feel insecure, will be to talk, not fight.

AN UNSTABLE "COLLECTIVE"

Assuming, then, no such dramatic development as a coup, a multi-regional revolt, or a Soviet attack, the successors -- even if they have been working together reasonably well as a "collective" during Mao's deterioration -- will still face a serious problem in distributing power among themselves in the immediate post-Mao period (meaning, a few months).

There is no one of Mao's stature to turn to as the "natural" leader. Although Hua Kuo-feng might immediately be named Chairman in the interest of an appearance of unity, a decision might be made (out of respect to Mao's memory) to retire the post of Chairman. This would put Hua on a collision course with the Leftist Chang Chun-chiao, the apparent de facto Secretary-General of the Party now and the other principal contender for the topmost place, for the post of de jure Secretary-General, which would then be the Party's most important position. It would bring the already contending forces in the leadership into a crucial conflict at once.

- 4 -

SECRET

SECRET

Assuming that the successors realize the dangers of such a conflict and retain the Chairmanship, recognizing Hua as the de facto leader and Chang as the (continuing) Secretary-General -- thus dividing the power and avoiding a direct confrontation -- Hua might later be installed as Chairman. However, neither Hua nor anyone else as Chairman would be able to dominate the Party as Mao had. Nor, probably, could any single faction -- whether Centrist, Leftist, Rightist, or other -- as power and influence will be widely dispersed. The group that dominates, both in the immediate post-Mao period and for some time beyond, will probably prove to be some combination of the strongest figures from all points of the political spectrum.

Little is known of the personal character of the key figures -- for example, the Centrist Hua Kuo-feng, the Leftist Chang Chun-chiao, and the two "wild cards," Chen Hsi-lien (the Commander of the Peking MR) and Wang Tung-hsing (the policeman), who look to be potentially the most powerful individuals.* Thus it cannot be judged with confidence whether they will be able to agree even temporarily on what would seem to outsiders an equitable distribution of power. Chen and Wang, acting together, might be 'king-makers' for any group of contenders of their choice; opposing one another, they might cause great disorder. On balance, it seems likely that most of the key figures, acting from a sense of national interest, will be able to agree upon some form of "collective" leadership which conceals the extent of their differences.

There is a credible distribution of power among the most important figures which, while probably unstable, might hold for the immediate post-Mao period. The center-line in such a "collective" would run through the Center of the Chinese political spectrum as now perceived -- "moderate" in Chinese terms, although still more "revolutionary" than, say, the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The constellation would be:

*The term "wild card" is used for a leader whose record does not permit his classification as Left, Center, or Right, but whose power is such that his support would be of great value to any classifiable contender.

SECRET

SECRET

-- The Centrist Hua Kuo-feng, 56, as de jure or de facto Party Chairman or (if that post is abolished) as Secretary-General;

-- The Leftist Chang Chun-chiao, 64, as Secretary-General or (if Hua gets that post) as Premier;

-- The Rightist old Marshal Yeh Chien-ying, 78, and the "wild card" Chen Hsi-lien, 63, remaining respectively Minister of Defense and Commander of the Peking MR, and the principal figures of the Military Affairs Committee which controls and directs the armed forces;

-- The Centrist Chi Teng-kuei, 45, remaining the Party's supervisor of organizational work and becoming the back-up for Hua or Chang in the Party or governmental structure;

-- The "wild card" Wang Tung-hsing, 60, continuing in the role of the leadership's principal security specialist;

-- Most of these, plus one of the lesser Leftists -- the now second-ranking Vice-Chairman of the Party, young Wang Hung-wen, about 40, or Madame Mao, 61, or the propagandist Yao Wen-yuan, about 45 -- as composing the bulk of the Politburo Standing Committee, the core of the Party power; and

-- The Rightist Chiao Kuan-hua, 64, the very able protege of Chou En-lai, continuing as Foreign Minister.

CENTRIST POLICIES

A Centrist leadership of this kind would be expected to take Centrist positions on three inescapable policy-questions: the group's relationship to Mao's "thought," the concept of "rehabilitation," and the Sino-Soviet-American triangle.

Mao's successors will almost certainly affirm their fidelity to his "thought," in the interest of continuity and because they have been so intimately associated with his policies. Whatever degrading of Mao in his Stalinist role may eventually occur, it will probably not come

SECRET

in the immediate post-Mao period. Some of the disruptive manifestations of Mao's "thought" can and very probably will be modified, but quietly, employing other aspects of the "thought" to justify this.

Mao's policy of "rehabilitation" -- of thousands of Party cadres, government functionaries, and military leaders brought down in the Cultural Revolution, many of whom are again in important posts -- will probably be reaffirmed, although many will remain purged. Some of the Leftist leaders would probably like to reverse the "rehabilitation" policy -- in effect, to call for another Cultural Revolution, another mass campaign to give them domination; but any such initiative would probably unite their opponents and result in the downfall of the Leftists.

Because the military will probably have a strong voice in the Centrist leadership, Mao's successors may move to reduce the tension in the Sino-Soviet relationship, even in the immediate post-Mao period. There is some room for a very limited easing of this tension without appearing to repudiate Mao himself. For example, there seems a good chance that the Chinese will quietly modify their demands in the border dispute.

It is not expected, however, that the Chinese will adopt a policy of equidistance from the USSR and the US. The probability seems strong that the USSR will remain the "main enemy," and that Mao's successors will persist in the policy of attempting to use the US as a strategic counterweight to the USSR. Hua Kuo-feng, who seems to have the best chance to be the leading figure of the post-Mao "collective," appears to be genuinely committed to this course, and so does the likely Foreign Minister. If for no other reason than that Peking's exploration of the potential of the US connection has not yet been completed, almost any constellation of post-Mao leaders could be expected to continue the process of exploration, even while complaining that the pace of "normalization" of Sino-American relations is too slow.

- 7 -

SECRET